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Children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions, is the second report on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic submitted to the Council and its subsidiary Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. The report is based on verified information on grave violations against children committed by all parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic during the period from 16 November 2013 to 30 June 2018.

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has continued unabated for more than seven years. The plethora of parties involved in the fighting, the constantly changing lines of control, along with the numerous political interests, have compounded the situation. The United Nations verified 12,537 grave violations against children, the most prevalent of which being killing and maiming; 10 per cent of the children concerned were killed or injured by weapons either prohibited or inherently indiscriminate or disproportionate in nature; one in three children conscripted, enlisted or used to participate actively in hostilities was below 15 years of age; schools and hospitals continued to be indiscriminately attacked, affecting entire education and health systems; medical and humanitarian personnel were continuously killed, injured or abducted; and children trapped in besieged areas suffered the compound effects of multiple violations and severe deprivations. The scale, severity and recurrence of those violations illustrate the growing erosion of compliance by all parties to the conflict with their child-protection obligations under international law.

It is noted in the present report that the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic remains severely constrained by security and access restrictions, representing significant challenges to the effective and timely monitoring, verification and attribution of grave violations against children that occurred on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic during the reporting period.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report, which covers the period from 16 November 2013 to 30 June 2018, is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict and provides detailed information on grave violations against children committed by all parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. The information included therein was documented and verified through the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic that was mandated by the Council, and complemented by a subregional approach to data gathering in refugee settings in the neighbouring countries. The country task force on monitoring and reporting of the United Nations was established in the last quarter of 2013, before the start of the reporting period.

2. The protracted and high-intensity nature of the ongoing conflict and the severe restrictions on access continued to pose considerable challenges to the United Nations for the verification of grave violations against children from within the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, during the reporting period, there were instances of border closure that drastically reduced or fully halted refugee movements and further hindered the timely collection of information from refugee settings outside the Syrian Arab Republic. Consequently, the numbers provided in the present report are not indicative of the overall scope of grave violations against children, but rather of the cases that the United Nations was able to document and verify. The experiences that girls had to go through remained the most difficult to capture, owing to the fear of stigmatization and revictimization within their communities.

II. Overview of political and security developments

3. The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has continued unabated for more than seven years and has evolved during that time into an internationalized armed conflict. The plethora of armed groups involved in the fighting and the constantly changing lines of control have compounded the situation. The rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) added another dimension to the conflict. ISIL took over huge swathes of territory and proclaimed Raqqah city as the capital of its "caliphate" in 2014. ISIL fighters battled both rival armed groups and government and pro-government forces. In September 2014, an international coalition comprising more than 70 Member States to counter ISIL started launching air strikes inside the Syrian Arab Republic to defeat ISIL.

4. Military and political support for the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic by its international allies bolstered its military advantage, in particular after the Russian Federation stationed air assets on Syrian soil, in September 2015. A year later, the city of Homs was retaken by government forces. A major turning point was the siege and retaking of eastern Aleppo in December 2016, following an intense military operation by government forces, with the support of pro-government forces. This gave the Government full control of Aleppo, the country's largest city, and deprived armed groups of their most significant urban stronghold. Since the end of December 2016, more territory has been retaken by government forces and their allies.

5. The widespread use of siege tactics by one or multiple parties, mostly the government forces, whereby an area is militarily encircled, with access and freedom of movement cut off or severely restricted, has been a consistent feature of the conflict. Such sieges have served to deny civilians food and other commodities essential for survival, as well as life-saving assistance, such as medical care. Siege

warfare was coupled with attacks to force the surrender of the opposing parties and resulted in forced population displacement, as well as the destruction of schools, hospitals and other vital infrastructure, including water pumping stations. Sieges also disrupted markets and livelihood opportunities, with negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, child marriage and child recruitment, resulting in severe psychosocial distress for caregivers and children.

6. In August 2016, Turkey launched operation "Euphrates Shield" to provide air and ground support to groups operating under the banner of the Free Syrian Army to repel ISIL fighters from its borders and curb the advance of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which were led by the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units. During the campaign, Turkey gained control of a 60-mile-long border territory in northern Aleppo. In June 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces announced an offensive to wrest control of Raqqah city from ISIL, with air and ground support from the international counter-ISIL coalition. The Syrian Democratic Forces took control of Raqqah city in October 2017, by which time ISIL had lost 85 per cent of the territory that it had once controlled in the Syrian Arab Republic.

7. All parties to the conflict have flagrantly violated their obligations to protect children under international humanitarian and human rights law. Indiscriminate attacks, including aerial attacks and the use of barrel bombs by government forces and indiscriminate shelling and improvised explosive device attacks by armed groups, were the primary cause of death and maiming among children. The use of chemical weapons by parties to the conflict, including nerve agents, was confirmed by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism, as well as the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

8. Against the backdrop of an increasingly intensified and internationalized conflict, efforts to bring parties to the negotiating table and secure lasting peace continued. The United Nations-led Geneva talks in January 2014 were aimed at bringing together the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition to discuss a transitional government. However, no agreement was reached. In November 2015, the Vienna peace talks resulted in a peace plan for the Syrian Arab Republic, which was endorsed by the Security Council in its resolution 2254 (2015), in which the Council reiterated the need for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué of 30 June 2012. In its resolution 2268 (2016), the Council outlined the terms of a cessation of hostilities, but the situation soon reversed. Additional rounds of United Nations-led talks continued in Geneva in 2016 and 2017.

9. Separate ceasefire talks were initiated by Iran (Islamic Republic of), the Russian Federation and Turkey in Astana, in January 2017. Round four of the Astana talks in May 2017 resulted in a declaration on "de-escalation zones". Intensified military operations, however, continued, including in northern rural Homs, Idlib and eastern Ghutah, which were among the de-escalation zones.

10. In January 2018, Turkey announced the start of military operation "Olive Branch" against the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units in Afrin, Aleppo Governorate. Following heavy fighting, by mid-March, Turkish armed forces, together with Free Syrian Army-affiliated groups, had gained full control over Afrin city and surrounding areas. The situation in besieged eastern Ghutah escalated in mid-February as government and pro-government forces launched a military operation to recapture the area, resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties, the already sparse cross-line humanitarian assistance being brought to a halt and civilians living in underground shelters. Following a five-year-long siege, government and pro-government forces eventually regained control over all towns and villages in

eastern Ghutah by mid-April. By the end of the reporting period, pro-government operations had intensified in south-eastern Dar'a, resulting in the displacement of up to 270,000 civilians and civilian casualties.

11. The Syrian Arab Republic as a whole was affected by massive population displacement throughout the reporting period. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the time of reporting, more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees, of whom 48 per cent were children, were registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and more than 6.2 million persons, of whom 2.5 million were children, were internally displaced. As of June 2018, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East reported that, of the 560,000 Palestine refugees originally living in the Syrian Arab Republic, 120,000 had fled the country, 254,000 were internally displaced and 34,000 were trapped in hard-to-reach areas.

III. Grave violations against children

12. Overall, during the reporting period, the United Nations verified 12,537 grave violations against children committed in the Syrian Arab Republic and 706 cases involving other issues of concern affecting children, such as deprivation of liberty and the military use of schools and hospitals. The number of verified grave violations mostly increased year by year: 2,285 in 2014, 2,740 in 2015, 3,151 in 2016 and 3,009 in 2017. By the end of the reporting period, the United Nations had verified 1,291 grave violations against children committed in the first half of 2018.

13. In addition, the United Nations gathered 4,631 reports of grave violations against children that took place during the reporting period but remain to be verified. As the verification of grave violations is an ongoing process, the yearly data reflected in the present report are higher than the ones included in annual reports published since 2014.

A. Recruitment and use

14. The recruitment and use of children occurred on a significant scale during the reporting period, with 3,377 verified cases (3,150 boys and 227 girls). Of those, 2,753 children (82 per cent) served in a combat role — armed, in uniform and sometimes following military training. In addition, 1,026 children (30 per cent) were below 15 years of age when they became associated with armed forces and armed groups. During the reporting period, the verified numbers of cases of recruitment and use of children continued to rise steadily: 351 in 2014, 538 in 2015, 1,034 in 2016 and 1,142 in 2017, with children, overall, becoming younger and increasingly used in combat roles. The United Nations also verified the recruitment and use of 310 children during the first half of 2018. During the reporting period, the recruitment and use of children was verified as having occurred in 13 of the 14 Syrian governorates, with Aleppo (1,140), Dayr al-Zawr (550), Raqqah (302), Rif Dimashq (271), Dar'a (247) and Hasakah (234) being the most prevalent locations.

15. Verified cases were attributed to groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (1,112); ISIL (1,068); the Kurdish armed groups (the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units and Asayish), including under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (415); government forces (155); pro-government militia (101); Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Nusrah Front) (213); Army of Islam (also known as "Jaysh al-Islam") (103); Ahrar al-Sham (97); Soldiers of al-Aqsa (17); Nur al-Din al-Zanki (14); unidentified armed groups (51); and armed groups and alliances no longer operating as such (31). Verified cases were

attributed to at least 90 distinct branches of armed forces and factions of armed groups across the Syrian Arab Republic. Among the verified cases, 76 children were of foreign origin and of 17 nationalities, highlighting the issue of trafficking and cross-border recruitment and use of children by ISIL and foreign pro-government militia.

16. During the reporting period, groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, including at least 58 distinct factions, were responsible for 33 per cent of the total number of verified cases, all boys.[1] Of those, 72 per cent occurred in the north-western part of the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 per cent in the south-western part and 13 per cent in the central and eastern parts. Ninety-one per cent of those boys (1,012) were used in combat roles, and the youngest recruit was nine years of age. Based on the number of verified cases only, groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army recruited an average of 20 children per month during the reporting period.

17. ISIL, including its affiliates,[2] was responsible for 32 per cent of the verified cases. The youngest recruit was four years of age. The boy, of foreign origin, was dressed in military fatigue, made to carry a weapon and featured in ISIL propaganda videos as a so-called "Cub of the Caliphate". Of the boys recruited by ISIL (982), 92 per cent were used in combat roles, such as guarding checkpoints, participating in patrols and front-line operations and conducting suicide attacks; while the remaining 8 per cent were used in support roles, such as aides-de-camp, messengers, spies or prison guards. Children were also used to commit a broad range of atrocities, including executions. Sixty-eight girls as young as eight years of age were also associated with ISIL through their forced marriage with, most often, foreign combatants, a practice further detailed in the section below on sexual violence.

18. The recruitment and use of boys (263) and girls (152) by Kurdish armed groups were also prevalent during the reporting period (12 per cent of the verified cases) and sharply increased in 2017 and the first quarter of 2018. Children as young as 10 years of age were associated with the People's Protection Units (249), the Women's Protection Units (137) and the Asayish male (14) and female (15) wings. Contrary to the stated policy of the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units, as further detailed below, 224 of the verified cases (54 per cent) involved children of 15 years of age or less and, overall, 398 of the verified cases (96 per cent) involved children in combat roles, armed and in uniform, including 133 girls. In July 2016, for example, two girls of between 16 and 17 years of age were posted, armed and in uniform, at a checkpoint in Kafr Jannah in the Afrin district of Aleppo. Identified as a new trend in 2017, 49 cases (12 per cent) referred to the recruitment of Arab children by Kurdish armed groups, in the context of the expansion of Syrian Democratic Forces towards territories in Aleppo, Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates. Overall, in at least 51 of the cases (12 per cent), the recruitment of children involved an element of coercion. In June 2017, in Aleppo Governorate, for example, at least three Arab boys of between 15 and 16 years of age were taken from Ayn Daqnah checkpoint in I'zaz district to be recruited by the People's Protection Units and taken to a military training centre in Afrin district.

19. Of the 256 verified cases attributed to government forces (155) [3] and pro-government militia (101), 197 boys, including a nine-year-old boy, served in combat roles (77 per cent). Some carried a "branch-217 security card" of the Syrian

[1] Including Hamza, the Mu'tazz Billah Brigade, Rahman Corps, pro-opposition members of the Shu'aytat tribe, Jaysh al-Yarmuk, Jaysh al-Izzah, Midfa'iyah Regiment, Fajr al-Islam, the Fallujat Hawran Division, Maghawir Baba Amr, the Umari brigades, Sayf al-Sham, Levant Front, the Sultan Murad Brigade and the Lions of the Sunnah.

[2] Including the "Hisbah" religious enforcement unit, the Yarmuk Martyrs Brigade, Ashbal al-Dawlah and the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army.

[3] Including the Air Force Intelligence Service, the military security, the military police and the national guard.

military intelligence, some were provided military training in Damascus and Rif Dimashq and some received a monthly stipend of around $80–$100. In August 2015, for example, four children of 16 years of age were seen guarding a government forces checkpoint in Rif Dimashq. Of the verified cases attributed to pro-government militia, children were associated with domestic militia[4] in 76 cases and with foreign ones,[5] involving both local and cross-border recruitment of children, in 25 cases. In one example in 2017, a 15-year-old Afghan Hazara boy associated with the Fatemiyoun Division, a pro-government militia composed mostly of Afghans, was staying undocumented in the Islamic Republic of Iran and was engaged to fight in the Syrian Arab Republic. The boy received military training by the group prior to deployment to the front line in Aleppo.

20. Of the remaining cases attributed to other armed groups, 414 boys (79 per cent) were used in combat roles, the youngest recruit being eight years of age. In one example from 2014, a 14-year-old boy armed and guarding a Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham checkpoint in Senjar, Idlib, joined the group following the death of his parents. In May 2017, five boys associated with Army of Islam in besieged Duma, Rif Dimashq, were wearing a military uniform, received a monthly stipend and underwent a 40-day-long weapons training. While verified cases of recruitment and use of children by ISIL, Army of Islam and groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army had notably decreased by the end of the reporting period — largely owing to the reduction in territories under their control — the recruitment and use of children by Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib and Hama Governorates sharply increased during the first half of 2018.

21. Where information was available, it confirmed that push and pull factors leading to the association of children with parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic included the payment of stipends, material incentives and family and community influence, as well as the need for protection, survival, the desire for revenge, status and identity, and intimidation. In several cases, parties to the conflict facilitated military training specifically targeted at children, a recurrence which underlines the role of commanders and military structures in taking advantage of children. During the reporting period, despite such complex security environments, more than 950 children formerly associated with multiple parties to the conflict and who informally disengaged were provided with support for their rehabilitation by child-protection actors and returned to civilian life.

Deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed forces or armed groups

22. The United Nations verified 293 cases of deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged association with armed forces and armed groups. During the reporting period, at least 264 boys and 29 girls as young as 10 years of age were verified as having been deprived of liberty by seven parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, including both State and non-State actors. Most of the verified incidents occurred in Hasakah (87), Damascus (64), Rif Dimashq (31) and Aleppo (27). Of those, 134 were attributed to government forces and 1 to pro-government forces, 92 to Kurdish actors, under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces, 39 to ISIL, 22 to groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, 3 to Iraqi security forces, 1 to Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and 1 to Nur al-Din al-Zanki.

[4] Including the popular committees or national defence forces of Qadisiyah, Salimiyah, Bludan, Dariyah and Tallkalakh, as well as the so-called "shabbiha" and the armed wing of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

[5] Including the Fatemiyoun Division, Hizbullah, the Al-Quds Brigades and the Defenders of the Shrine.

23. Children allegedly associated with opposing parties to the conflict were arrested at checkpoints and during house raids or captured during military operations. By June 2018, for example, 80 boys were held by Kurdish actors under the accusation of involvement with ISIL. In a separate case, three Syrian children of between 11 and 17 years of age who had been recruited in the Syrian Arab Republic and trafficked into Iraq were detained by Iraqi security forces for their alleged association with ISIL. In February 2016, three children of between 15 and 17 years of age were publicly beheaded by ISIL in front of their community, after being arrested, interrogated and accused of "spying" against the group. In September 2015, a 17-year-old boy was arrested at his family's shop by government forces on suspicion of armed-group activity and taken to the nearby military intelligence base in Rif Dimashq. A week later, the parents were notified that the boy had died from a heart attack while in detention. Children frequently reported being subjected to or having witnessed ill-treatment and torture while they were deprived of liberty.

24. In the context of the military advances of the Syrian Democratic Forces into ISIL-held areas during the second half of 2017, an additional 116 children of foreign origin were deprived of liberty by Kurdish actors in the north-eastern part of the Syrian Arab Republic, on the basis of suspected family ties with ISIL fighters.[6] By June 2018, it was also reported that at least 1,175 children and 435 women were deprived of liberty in three sites across the north-eastern part of the Syrian Arab Republic, managed by Kurdish authorities and guarded by Asayish police forces. The families included 43 nationalities and reportedly had no access to consular assistance.

B. Killing and maiming

25. During the reporting period, the United Nations verified the killing of 3,891 children (of whom 1,800 are known to be boys and 865 to be girls) and the maiming of 3,448 children (of whom 1,294 are known to be boys and 626 to be girls). There was a significant increase in the verified number of children killed over the years: 499 in 2014, 872 in 2015, 935 in 2016 and 1,118 in 2017. Since the beginning of 2018, 462 children have been killed. Of all 7,339 child casualties, the majority occurred in Rif Dimashq (1,396), Idlib (1,359), Aleppo (1,358), Dayr al-Zawr (765), Dar'a (760), Homs (629), Damascus (336) and Raqqah (327). The verified cases were attributed to government or pro-government air forces (2,429), government forces (1,809), pro-government forces (191) and pro-government militia (9),[7] ISIL (688), the international counter-ISIL coalition (102), the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (43), Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (39), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and Operation Olive Branch (30), Army of Islam (5), Ahrar al-Sham (3), Soldiers of al-Aqsa (3) and unidentified perpetrators (1,988).

26. The actual scale of child casualties caused by the conflict is believed to be much higher than the number of cases the United Nations was able to verify, given the high-intensity nature of the conflict, access limitations and limited human resources.

27. Throughout the reporting period, the number of verified cases remained consistently high year after year, signifying an alarming trend with regard to the eroding respect for civilian life, including that of children, by parties to the conflict. At least 717 of the verified child casualties (10 per cent) involved the use of inherently

[6] In two separate instances, groups of women and children allegedly affiliated with ISIL and in Kurdish custody were handed over to a delegation of the Russian Federation.

[7] "Pro-government militia" refers to non-State armed groups supporting the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. In the case of the present violation, they include the popular committees or national defence forces of Suwayda' and Asaliyah, the so-called "shabbiha" and Hizbullah.

indiscriminate or disproportionate weapons or unlawful weapons, such as barrel bombs, cluster munitions and toxic chemical agents. The high numbers of child casualties were largely due to the lack of compliance by the parties to the conflict with their basic obligations under international humanitarian law, such as the principle of distinction between civilian and combatants, the duty to take all feasible precautions, including in the choice of weaponry and the means of its use, to avoid and prevent incidental deaths and injuries among civilians, in particular in densely populated areas, and the fundamental requirement of proportionality. In highly urbanized areas, it has been near impossible for civilians, including children, to extract themselves from the destructive impact of high-intensity military operations.

28. Of the verified child casualties, 4,463 (61 per cent) were the result of air strikes. In April 2017, for example, air strikes hit a residential area north of Khan Shaykhun, Idlib Governorate, killing at least 20 boys and 15 girls and maiming 23 other children. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons concluded that the victims had been exposed to sarin, a chemical agent (see S/2017/904). In another incident, in May 2017, nine children were killed and one boy was maimed during an international counter-ISIL coalition air strike that hit a residential building in Albu Kamal, Dayr al-Zawr Governorate. The indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas, including markets, mosques, shelters for internally displaced persons, schools and residential buildings, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians through vehicle- and person-born improvised explosive devices in public spaces resulted in 1,259 (17 per cent) and 579 (8 per cent) verified child casualties, respectively. In November 2016, for example, rockets and mortars fired by armed groups hit government-held western Aleppo, killing 8 children and maiming 30 others. In April 2017, 75 buses transporting around 5,000 evacuees from the besieged towns of Fu'ah and Kafraya, Idlib Governorate, were waiting at Rashidin checkpoint, Aleppo Governorate, when a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device exploded, killing 68 children and injuring 28 others. Children were also killed or injured by shooting (262), including by snipers, explosive remnants of war and victim-activated improvised explosive devices (174) and unidentified explosions (175). The United Nations verified nine cases of children associated with ISIL who were used as suicide bombers during the reporting period.

29. The United Nations further verified the death by torture or summary execution of 152 children by firearm, knife, crucifixion, stoning, sword or throwing from a high-rise building, most often during their abduction or deprivation of liberty. Those cases were attributed to ISIL (123), government forces (9), Free Syrian Army-affiliated groups (2) and unidentified perpetrators (18). In March 2016, for example, three boys of between 8 and 12 years of age were forcibly taken by ISIL in Tabaqah, Raqqah Governorate, and publicly executed for alleged homosexual acts by being thrown from a tower. In similar contexts, 99 children suffered lasting injuries because of torture or forced amputation. In addition, of the 3,377 children associated with armed forces or armed groups, 361 boys were verified as killed or maimed owing to or during their association with parties to the conflict. In December 2016, for example, near Ra'i, northern Aleppo Governorate, pro-government air strikes killed three boys of between 14 and 17 years of age while they were carrying goods and weapons for Jaysh al-Shamal, a group self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

30. Incidents of sexual violence against children attributed to belligerents remained highly underreported, owing to the social stigma attached with such a violation. The 98 verified incidents, which affected 95 girls as young as eight years of age and three boys of between 12 and 16 years of age, included rape, gang rape, forced marriage to armed group fighters, trafficking and sexual enslavement, sexual assault while being

deprived of liberty and threats of sexual violence. Verified incidents occurred in 9 of 14 governorates, the majority taking place in Raqqah (44), Aleppo (15) and Dayr al-Zawr (14). Of the verified cases, 80 were attributed to ISIL, 6 to government forces, 6 to Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, 2 to pro-government militia,[8] 2 to a group self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army,[9] 1 to the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units, and 1 to an unidentified armed group.

31. From early 2014, the forced marriage of girls to ISIL fighters and the resulting sexual violence became common in ISIL-held areas, with the parents often coerced into complying. In March 2016, for example, a 14-year-old girl was abducted from her home by six ISIL fighters, including five underage boys, and raped multiple times over the period of one week. The incident occurred after the family had refused to marry the girl to one of the boys the evening before. In some cases, girls or their families were persuaded by ISIL women delegations conducting home visits or through financial incentives. Girls forcibly married to ISIL fighters seldom knew their husbands' true names and were frequently divorced or abandoned when the fighters were redeployed to other areas or returned to their countries of origin. In one instance in August 2017, a 15-year-old girl in Raqqah city was forcibly married four times in a two-year period, including to three foreign ISIL fighters. At least 15 of the verified cases attributed to ISIL were girls known to have been forcibly married multiple times, either through temporary marriages or after the "husband" was killed in combat. In the context of ISIL territorial losses, many of the girls moved along with their ISIL "husbands", putting them at further risk. Girls married to ISIL fighters were thus reportedly killed in air strikes in at least six cases and reportedly used as suicide bombers in at least three cases.

32. Negative coping mechanisms emerged to protect girls from forced marriage to ISIL fighters, including restricting their movement outside the home and early marriage. In September 2014, Kurdish refugees from Kobane reported the capture of girls by ISIL fighters for sexual exploitation purposes as one of the primary drivers of displacement. Towards the end of 2014, Yazidi girls captured by ISIL in Sinjar, Iraq, were trafficked into the Syrian Arab Republic, where they were openly sold and used as sex slaves, as part of ISIL ongoing atrocities against the religious minority. The enslaved girls were forced by ISIL to self-identify by not covering their heads. Around the same period, ISIL also issued official guidance on the justifications for and the treatment of captured sex slaves, including children. Cases of sexual violence against girls were also verified in the context of forced marriage by members of Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, of a group self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and of an unidentified armed group.

33. Sexual violence against girls and boys by government forces and pro-government militia continued during the reporting period. In January 2014, for example, a 14-year-old girl was taken by government forces from a school in Dar'a and held for four days at a nearby military base, where she was repeatedly raped. In February 2014, a 13-year-old boy was arrested by a pro-government militia at a checkpoint in Suwayda', after which he was detained for several days and subjected to torture and sexual abuse. After being subjected to sexual violence, some girls and boys were brought back and released into their community, purportedly to expose them as victims of rape and encourage rejection by their families.

[8] Including the popular committee or national defence forces of Suwayda' and pro-government members of the Shu'aytat tribe in Dayr al-Zawr.

[9] Faylaq al-Sham.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

34. Verified attacks on both schools and hospitals also steadily increased year after year,[10] with 92 cases in 2014, 115 in 2015 and 180 in 2016, and remained very high in 2017, with 166 cases. In the first half of 2018, the United Nations verified 56 attacks on schools and education personnel and 92 attacks on hospitals. The United Nations also gathered unverified reports of an additional 293 attacks on schools and 188 attacks on hospitals during the reporting period, which implies a much larger scope of attacks on education and health facilities in the Syrian Arab Republic. At least 47 attacks on schools (13 per cent) and 26 attacks on hospitals (8 per cent) involved the reported use of prohibited or inherently indiscriminate or disproportionate weapons, such as barrel bombs, cluster munitions and bunker busters.

1. Attacks on schools

35. The United Nations verified 358 attacks on schools, attributed to government or pro-government air forces (130), government forces (120), pro-government forces (7), ISIL (26), the international counter-ISIL coalition (4), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (3), Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (2), the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (1) and unidentified perpetrators (65). Some schools were affected more than once. Those attacks also resulted in 112 education personnel being killed or injured. Attacks on schools occurred mainly in Idlib (109), Aleppo (81), Rif Dimashq (57), Dar'a (38) and Dayr al-Zawr (22).

36. Those attacks included 241 involved air strikes (67 per cent), 76 shelling, 14 unidentified explosions 13 raids, 5 improvised explosive devices, 4 unexploded ordnances, 3 wanton destruction, 1 shooting and 1 threat of attack. In October 2015, for example, the Kamal Qal'aji school complex in Has village, Idlib Governorate, was severely damaged by pro-government air strikes that also killed three teachers and 19 schoolchildren and maimed 61 others. In addition, in nine incidents of attacks on education personnel, three education personnel were shot, and hundreds of teachers were collectively subjected to threats and intimidation. For example, in March 2015, Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (then known as Nusrah Front) shot a teacher and two children and abducted a 10-year-old girl and her mother during an attack on Kafanez town, Hama Governorate. At least 415 children were killed and 615 injured while present at or near a school.

37. In addition, ISIL forcibly closed schools across areas under its control in the Syrian Arab Republic, which had a major impact on children, who were thus deprived of education. In some schools, ISIL replaced the Syrian official education programme with an ISIL school curriculum, often inclusive of military training.

2. Military use of schools

38. Schools were frequently used for military purposes, with 72 cases of military use of schools verified during the reporting period, a majority of which occurred in Aleppo (23), Raqqah (14) and Idlib (12). Verified cases were attributed to ISIL (34), government forces (13), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (10), Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (8) and the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (7). The schools were mainly used as training grounds, for ammunition storage, as detention facilities, for accommodation and as military bases.

[10] Attacks on schools: 65 in 2014, 69 in 2015, 90 in 2016 and 78 in 2017. Attacks on hospitals: 27 in 2014, 46 in 2015, 90 in 2016 and 88 in 2017.

Of those schools, at least 29 were subsequently the object of an attack. In other words, 8 per cent of the schools attacked were used for military purposes.

3. Attacks on hospitals

39. The United Nations verified 343 attacks on hospitals and health clinics, attributed to government or pro-government air forces (190), government forces (55), pro-government forces (6), ISIL (12), the international counter-ISIL coalition (4), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (3),[11] Ahrar al-Sham (1), the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (1) and unidentified perpetrators (41). Some hospitals were attacked more than once. Those attacks resulted in 188 medical staff being killed or injured. Attacks on hospitals occurred mainly in Idlib (120), Aleppo (70), Rif Dimashq (57), Dar'a (30) and Raqqah (15).

40. Of those attacks, 267 involved air strikes, 28 shelling, 25 unidentified explosions, 12 improvised explosive devices, 7 shooting, 3 raids and 1 looting. In April 2016, for example, 13 children and four medical personnel were killed when pro-government air strikes hit Al-Quds hospital in the Sukkari neighbourhood of Aleppo city. In addition, 12 attacks on health personnel resulted in 10 health personnel being abducted, 3 being subjected to threats and intimidation and 1 being killed in an air strike. In one incident, in May 2017, three doctors were abducted by the Free Syrian Army-affiliated Rahman Corps from the Yeman medical complex in Mulayhah, Rif Dimashq Governorate. At least 95 children were killed and 92 injured while present at or near a hospital or health facility.

4. Military use of hospitals

41. The United Nations verified the military use of 24 hospitals, in Raqqah (12), Aleppo (6), Dayr al-Zawr (5) and Idlib (1). Of those cases, 22 were attributed to ISIL, 1 to Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and 1 to an unidentified armed group. The hospitals served as ammunition storage, bases or sniper posts and were often exclusively used by ISIL fighters and their families. Thirteen of those hospitals were subsequently the object of an attack. Seven per cent of the hospitals attacked were therefore used for military purposes. In August 2017, for example, the national hospital in Raqqah city was hit by international counter-ISIL coalition air strikes while it was used for military purposes by ISIL fighters.

E. Abduction

42. The United Nations verified the abduction of 693 children (of whom 510 are known to be boys and 77 to be girls) over the reporting period, with a progressive yearly decrease from 2014 (416) to 2017 (89 children), largely explained by the reduction of areas held by ISIL. Most of the cases occurred in Aleppo (261), Raqqah (133), Rif Dimashq (61), Dayr al-Zawr (51) and Homs (43). The majority of verified abductions, namely 65 per cent, were attributed to ISIL (450). The remaining cases were attributed to government forces (155), pro-government militia (38),[12] pro-government forces (1), the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (30), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (10),[13] Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (2), Soldiers of al-Aqsa (1) and unidentified armed groups (26).

[11] Including Rahman Corps and the First Coastal Division.

[12] Including the popular committees or national defence forces of Bludan, Suwayda' and the Druze, as well as the so-called "shabbiha".

[13] Including the Karamah Brigade and First Army (also known as Jaysh al-Awal).

43. The abduction of boys and girls by ISIL became recurrent during the reporting period. While abductions commonly targeted individuals and small groups, there were also incidents of large-scale abductions, sometimes followed by torture and executions. In May 2014, for example, ISIL abducted 153 Kurdish schoolboys of between 13 and 17 years of age, purportedly to secure prisoner exchanges with the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units. The boys were abducted in Manbij district, while travelling home to Kobane following completion of their school exams. The children were held in a school, given daily lessons on ISIL ideology and forced to watch ISIL propaganda videos. Those who failed to complete their lessons, attempted to escape or were perceived as supporting the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units were separated from the group and detained in the ISIL-run Manbij prison. Children reported being subjected to beatings with sticks, hoses and electric cables, while they were hung by the hands or with the head through a tire. By the end of October of the same year, all children were released or had escaped.

44. ISIL also forcibly transferred children from and to areas in Iraq that were under its control at the time. In June 2015, for example, a 15-year-old boy, together with a group of 50 other ISIL prisoners, was moved across the Syrian border to Mosul. In Iraq, the boy was repeatedly interrogated and tortured while held in captivity by ISIL, including being hung in stress positions and electrocuted, before being found "guilty" of perceived support for the Free Syrian Army and sentenced to death. In view of his age, his sentence was eventually commuted to amputation. ISIL further established the practice of informally adopting children of foreign fighters killed in combat. Those children were described as "Cubs of the Caliphate" and future ISIL fighters, suggesting that they were taken care of primarily for recruitment and training purposes. In one incident, in October 2015, two European boys of seven and eight years of age, respectively, whose parents had joined ISIL and had been killed in the Syrian Arab Republic, were subsequently informally adopted by a non-Syrian ISIL fighter with that precise objective.

45. During the reporting period, government forces and pro-government militia abducted 174 children as young as three months of age, of whom 117 are known to be boys and 24 to be girls. Children were forcibly taken from their homes, off the street and at checkpoints, often together with adults or family members, for a variety of reasons, including the suspected affiliation of relatives with the opposition or while attempting to flee to neighbouring countries, as well as to secure prisoner exchanges with armed opposition groups, receive ransom payments for release or other unspecified motives. Families were usually not informed about the whereabouts of their relatives or any judicial process surrounding such enforced disappearance. In December 2013, for example, the popular committee of Suwayda' abducted some 50 persons who were travelling in a truck on their way to the border with Jordan to seek refuge. The group included a 4-year-old boy who was hit on the head with a rifle, a pregnant woman who lost her baby after receiving a blow to her stomach and a 15-year-old girl who was reportedly gang-raped.

46. In addition to the aforementioned cases of abduction, the United Nations verified 210 cases in which ISIL, including the Hisbah unit, forcibly removed boys from their homes and public places for alleged infractions of rules and restrictions imposed on the civilian population in the areas under its control. Boys as young as eight years of age were held in captivity in ISIL prisons, without any judicial process in line with international norms and standards, for a wide range of acts that ISIL classified as crimes, including smuggling, not praying, smoking, possession of a mobile phone, immodest dress code, blasphemy, criticizing ISIL, homosexual relations and attempting to flee ISIL-held areas. In August 2016, in Tabaqah, Raqqah Governorate, for example, a 16-year-old boy was forcibly taken by ISIL from his

family house for possession of a mobile phone, held overnight in an unknown location and publicly executed the following day by gunshot.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

47. Throughout the reporting period, between 8,100 and as many as 974,000 civilians were at any one time living under siege in the Syrian Arab Republic. Siege warfare was a defining feature of the Syrian conflict throughout the entire reporting period and used mostly by government forces and non-State armed opposition groups in the towns of Fu'ah and Kafraya, as well as by ISIL, mostly in Dayr al-Zawr. For some, such as those living in parts of the eastern Ghutah enclave, the Government's siege lasted nearly the entire reporting period. Civilians, including children, were denied basic rights, including freedom of movement and access to adequate food, water, shelter, health care and other commodities necessary for their survival. Protection needs in besieged areas were also exacerbated, with exposure to intense hostilities, including air strikes and shelling, threatening civilians' lives and causing severe distress, trauma and psychological harm. Overall, more than 2,000 of the verified violations that occurred during the reporting period took place in besieged areas, demonstrating the correlation between siege and grave violations against children. By the end of June 2018, there were an estimated 8,100 people still living in two besieged areas in the Syrian Arab Republic (Fu'ah and Kafraya). Those communities were evacuated in mid-July, thereby ending siege warfare as a defining feature of the Syrian conflict.

48. Starting in 2014, families from besieged areas reported steep increases in food and fuel prices, and children often survived on one single meal a day, sometimes consisting of grass mixed with spices and olives. Aid reached some areas, but deliveries were piecemeal and inconsistent. For example, from April 2014 until nearly the end of the reporting period, no or minimal humanitarian access was granted to the population of the Yarmouk camp of Palestine refugees, in Damascus, where 3,500 children lived. In late 2016 and early 2017, more than 5 million persons in Damascus and surrounding areas were left without regular access to clean and safe drinking water, owing to damage inflicted to the Wadi Barada and Ayn al-Fijah springs in the context of hostilities between government forces, Hizbullah and non-State armed opposition groups. In the south-eastern part of the Syrian Arab Republic, from June 2016, up to 100,000 persons were at one point stranded in the Rukban camp, along the border between the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan, receiving only minimal humanitarian assistance. At the time of reporting, some 50,000 people were still stranded in the camp, of whom at least one third was estimated to be children.

49. Overall, the United Nations verified 308 instances of denial of humanitarian access, of which 174 involved denial of humanitarian assistance and 134 involved attacks on humanitarian facilities, personnel and transports. In 2016 and 2017, there was a drastic increase in denial of humanitarian access, mainly caused by military siege tactics. Verified cases were attributed to government forces (132), government or pro-government air forces (42), pro-government forces and militia (9),[14] ISIL (39), Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (6), the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units and Asayish (5), groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (5),[15] Army of Islam (2), Ahrar al-Sham (2), Nur al-Din al-Zanki (1), unidentified perpetrators (61) and armed groups and alliances no longer operating as such (4). Most incidents occurred in Rif Dimashq (87), Aleppo (60), Idlib (47), Homs (33) and Raqqah (21). Of the attacks on humanitarian facilities, personnel and

[14] Including Hizbullah and the so-called "shabbiha".

[15] Including the Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades and Jaysh al-Ashair.

transports, 61 involved air strikes, 25 shelling, 10 threats, 9 shooting, 10 improvised explosive devices, 8 abductions, 5 looting, 2 unexploded ordnances and 4 unidentified explosions.

50. Those incidents resulted in 154 humanitarian workers being killed, injured or abducted. In September 2016, for example, a clearly marked United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy of 31 trucks delivering life-saving assistance in Urum al-Kubra, rural western Aleppo Governorate, sustained an attack during which at least 12 volunteers, five drivers and the head of the local branch of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent were killed. At least nine incidents included humanitarian workers providing life-saving assistance to civilians.

IV. Advocacy and dialogue with parties to the conflict

51. The United Nations has been engaging with parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as other Member States indirectly involved in the conflict, to facilitate the establishment of measures aimed at preventing and ending grave violations against children committed by all parties to the conflict. Ending the recruitment and use of children by all belligerents, including government forces, was among the priorities discussed throughout the reporting period.

52. In February 2017, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic released its national workplan to prevent and respond to underage recruitment. In support of its implementation, towards the second half of 2017, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs organized a series of workshops for government officials, Syrian civil society organizations and the media on the international framework on the prevention of and response to child recruitment. The United Nations supported the development of a dedicated training manual by the Commission. Discussions with the State Ministry of National Reconciliation focused on the need to develop a national strategy for the rehabilitation and reintegration of children recruited by armed groups and for its implementation at the local level. In March 2018, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic established in Damascus a national committee for the implementation of its national workplan on child recruitment, chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, with a view to revitalizing the commitment of the Government.

53. Engagement with the humanitarian civil-military coordination cell in Jordan, tasked with civil-military liaison between the humanitarian community and the international counter-ISIL coalition, included an overview of evidence-based concerns regarding child protection and the proposal of remedial actions by its partners in the Syrian Arab Republic. This has included a dialogue on the recruitment and use of children by the Syrian Democratic Forces and on the deprivation of liberty of children allegedly associated with ISIL by authorities in the north-eastern part of the Syrian Arab Republic.

54. In 2017, seven groups[16] self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army signed the Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict launched by Geneva Call, which, inter alia, prohibits the recruitment and use of children under 18 years of age in hostilities. In 2014, the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units had signed a similar deed of commitment and reportedly released 149 boys and girls from their ranks. However, contrary to the provisions of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, acceded to by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in 2003, a reservation was included stating that children of 16

[16] The 23rd Division, the 21st Force Union, the Central Division, the First Coastal Division, the Mu'tasim Brigade, Brigade 51 and Al-Watan Liberation Movement.

years of age and above would be allowed to join the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units of their own volition for engagement in non-military activities, while not being allowed to participate directly or indirectly in hostilities. While deeds of commitments are welcome expressions by armed groups to abide by humanitarian norms, they do not override the legal obligations of armed groups, such as the full prohibition of recruitment and use of persons under 18 years of age in any role. Moreover, they do not replace action plans with the United Nations to end and prevent grave violations.

55. In August 2017, a "group of friends" on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic was established in Jordan at the initiative of Belgium and Canada. In November of the same year, the group convened a dialogue with the United Nations, which resulted in the appointment in February 2018 of senior-level focal points within the international counter-ISIL coalition military structure to advance discussions on child protection with the Syrian Democratic Forces.

V. Observations and recommendations

56. I am dismayed by the scale, severity and recurrence of grave violations endured by children in the Syrian Arab Republic and by the fact that they have continued to be severely affected by a protracted conflict that is now in its eighth year. I am appalled by the fact that, throughout those years, violations against children by all parties to the conflict have in fact continued relentlessly, demonstrating a blatant disregard for the life and fundamental rights of children in the Syrian Arab Republic. I once again strongly urge all parties to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, and call upon them and those exercising influence on them to immediately take all actions necessary for and effective in better protecting the rights of all children in the Syrian Arab Republic.

57. I am utterly appalled by the fact that none of the parties to the conflict has taken any concrete and effective measures towards ensuring the accountability of perpetrators, consistent with international law. Addressing this widespread impunity is crucial in paving the way towards a just and lasting peace in the Syrian Arab Republic.

58. I urge parties to the conflict to take concrete and effective measures with a view to avoiding and preventing child casualties during the conduct of hostilities, including by immediately ceasing to use means and methods of warfare that are inherently indiscriminate or disproportionate in nature, as well as to stop unlawful attacks on schools, hospitals and humanitarian actors. I also urge them not to use schools for military purposes and to comply with their obligation under international humanitarian law to respect and protect hospitals and other medical facilities.

59. I call upon all parties to halt and prevent the recruitment and use of boys and girls under 18 years of age in any role in the armed conflict, consistent with the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the declaration made by the Syrian Arab Republic upon its accession thereto in 2003, including through the development and dissemination of military orders prohibiting the practice, the establishment of screening and age-assessment systems and the immediate and orderly release of children from their ranks towards a return to civilian life.

60. While welcoming efforts made by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to develop a national workplan to prevent and respond to child recruitment, the United Nations, through the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, continued to verify the recruitment and use

of children by government forces throughout 2017. I urge the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to build on this workplan and develop an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by its forces and to fully implement law No. 11 of 2013, by which the recruitment and involvement of children in hostilities are prohibited.

61. I also urge all the other parties to the conflict listed in my annual report on children and armed conflict (see A/72/865–S/2018/465, annexes I and II) to enter into a dialogue with the United Nations for the development and implementation of verifiable action plans to end and prevent all grave violations against children.

62. All children allegedly associated with opposing armed forces or armed groups and captured in the course of military operations should be treated primarily as victims of recruitment and use, and parties to the conflict should develop and implement standard operating procedures for the handover of children to civilian child-protection actors.

63. In this regard, I am deeply disturbed by the increasing number of children arbitrarily deprived of liberty for their alleged association or affiliation with parties to the conflict, and I urge all actors concerned to release all those children and ensure their full reintegration through specialized child-protection programmes aimed at providing the support that they need.

64. I urge all parties to allow and facilitate sustained, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need, in particular in hard-to-reach areas and areas that have been retaken by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, including by lifting any impediments that could delay, reduce or prevent the delivery of humanitarian assistance, without discrimination. I also urge them to enable the safe, dignified, sustained and voluntary return of displaced persons.

65. I am also extremely concerned about the fate of foreign women and children deprived of liberty, often survivors of forced and early marriage, sexual violence and abduction by armed groups, as well as the status of children born of rape. I call upon all parties and Governments concerned, including those of countries of origin, to facilitate access to that group for humanitarian purposes, ensure access to required services, in particular consular services, and cooperate with the United Nations to seek rights-based durable solutions and preserve family unity.

66. I further call upon:

(a) All parties involved to ensure that the protection of children is included in all aspects of the peace negotiations and stabilization efforts, in line with Security Council resolution 2427 (2018);

(b) All Member States and the donor community to ensure long-term financial support for the implementation of child-protection programmes, which are indispensable for the rehabilitation and the reintegration of children affected by the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, including psychosocial support;

(c) All Member States to support, through the provision of sustained resources, the continuing work of the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic;

(d) The Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict to request an update by my Special Representative one year from the date of issuance of the present report, with the objective of providing a briefing on challenges and progress made on child-protection dialogue with parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, with a view to timely informing Security Council and Member State actions.